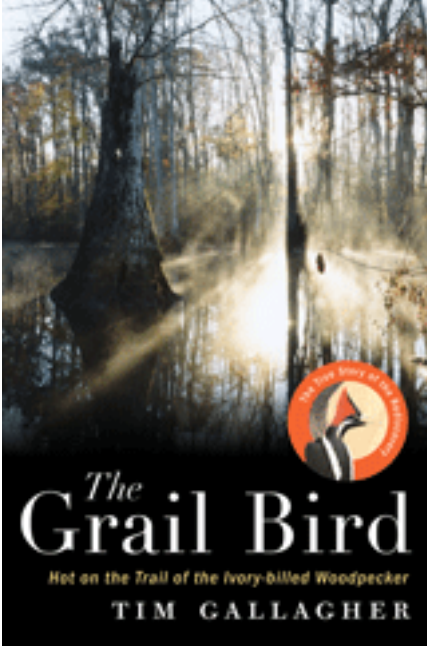


Press Release



The Grail Bird

by Tim Gallagher

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The ivory-billed woodpecker lives!
New book tells the story of the rediscovery

About the Book

The ivory-billed woodpecker — ghost bird of the swamp. Big, beautiful, iconic, and mysterious, the bird is a symbol of everything that has gone wrong with our relationship to the environment. First plundered by nineteenth-century collectors and then a victim of massive habitat destruction, the bird has been sought for decades by those trying to determine whether this remarkable species still exists. Their findings have been met with ridicule and scorn; since the early twentieth century, most of the scientific world has believed that the ivory-billed woodpecker is extinct.

But when author Tim Gallagher set out to write *The Grail Bird*, he mounted his own quest for the elusive bird and discovered the amazing truth: the ivory-billed woodpecker lives!

The Grail Bird goes behind recent headlines to tell the story of Tim Gallagher's pursuit and discovery of the bird. Editor in chief of *Living Bird*, the flagship publication of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Gallagher couldn't (and wouldn't) accept the idea that the ivory-bill was gone forever. He set out to learn everything he could about the bird, tracking down and interviewing dozens of people who claimed to have seen it, reading everything he could find, and finally hitting the swamps himself to explore potential ivory-bill habitats across the South. An irrefutable sighting by Gallagher and a colleague in February 2004 quickly led to the largest search ever mounted to find a rare bird, as researchers fanned out across the bayou to document this most iconic of birds.

"You never know when you get up in the morning what earth-shaking event might take place and change your life forever," Gallagher writes. For Tim Gallagher, it was reading a posting on a canoe club listserv about a strange woodpecker a kayaker named Gene Sparling had seen on a float trip down a remote bayou in eastern Arkansas. Less than two weeks after this sighting, Gallagher and his buddy Bobby Ray Harrison—art history professor, photographer, southerner, and dyed-in-the-wool ivory-bill chaser—hit the swamp with Sparling, canoeing through the bayou in search of the mystery bird. Tim and Bobby had their first ivory-bill sighting there.

In this unparalleled birding adventure story, Tim Gallagher takes us across the country, from the renowned Cornell Lab in Ithaca, New York, to the Big Thicket country of east Texas, the Atchafalaya Swamp in Louisiana, and the wild bayous of Arkansas. He brings to life figures from history, such as John James Audubon, Alexander Wilson, and Arthur A. Allen, and introduces characters like Mary Scott, a corporate lawyer turned ghost-bird chaser, and Fielding Lewis, the chairman of the Louisiana Boxing Commission, whose anonymous snapshots of the ivory-bill were met with skepticism in the 1970s. Readers join the expedition team along with celebrated naturalists, researchers, and the Cornell Lab's birding team, the Sapsuckers.

We have lost most of the vast old-growth forests of the South, and nothing symbolizes that loss more than the ivory-billed woodpecker. But the rediscovery of the bird symbolizes hope for these neglected and abused habitats, which with time and effort can be partially restored. We have been given one final chance to get it right, to save this bird and the bottomland swamp forests it needs in order to survive.

History comes alive in *The Grail Bird*, in which the expeditions of yesteryear take on present-day relevance in light of the ongoing quest. The dedication of the obsessed bunch of searchers is tangible, and Tim Gallagher's passion for the bird led not only to this book but to the rediscovery of a species. Readers of *The Grail Bird* will cheer for the ivory-billed woodpecker's miraculous survival, and they will hear the bird's distinctive *kent* calls in their imagination long after they finish the book.

About the Author

Tim Gallagher is a lifelong bird fanatic. An award-winning writer and photographer, he is editor in chief of *Living Bird*, the flagship publication of the renowned Cornell Lab of Ornithology. For many years Tim has traveled to faraway places, from the high Arctic to the tropics, to study and photograph birds and report on research.

He is the author of *Wild Bird Photography*, *Birdwatching*, *Where the Birds Are: The 100 Best Birding Spots in North America*, *Parts Unknown: A Naturalist's Journey in Search of Birds and Wild Places*, and most recently *The Grail Bird*.

A Conversation with Tim Gallagher

What motivated you to start searching for the ivory-billed woodpecker?

I've always been the kind of person who gets caught up in obsessive quests, most of which seem to involve birds. I have taken part in many research expeditions to faraway places like Greenland, Iceland, and northern Canada, roping down lofty cliffs to falcon nests. The ivory-bill has been lurking in my mind since the early 1970s, when I read about some possible sightings of the bird in east Texas. Although many scientists discounted these reports, they piqued my interest and got me started learning more about the bird. The ivory-bill is so iconic: big, beautiful, mysterious — a symbol of everything that's gone wrong with our relationship to the environment. I thought if someone could just locate an ivory-bill, could prove that this remarkable species still exists, it would be the most hopeful event imaginable. We would have one final chance to save this bird and the bottomland swamp forests it needs to survive.

You've had many amazing experiences in your arctic expeditions. What was it about the search for the ivory-bill that appealed to your sense of adventure?

In some ways, we live in an age of diminished challenges. Now even climbing Mount Everest or riding a dogsled to the North Pole has become blasé — a feat any businessman with a big enough bankroll can accomplish in a couple of weeks. The hunt for the ivory-billed woodpecker was different. I knew that accomplishing it would require endless slogging through boot-sucking muck and mire and swampland — through mosquitoes, deadly water moccasins, bears, and who knows what else — as well as an amazing amount of luck. As I began the search, rediscovering this iconic species loomed as one of the last great challenges left in the latte age.

Why has the public's interest in the ivory-billed woodpecker grown so much during the last few years?

When a Louisiana turkey hunter emerged from the swamp in the spring of 1999 with a tale about a pair of large woodpeckers with field marks that exactly fit those of the ivory-bill, people were astounded. Everyone believed this bird had been extinct for decades, and now here was a seemingly credible report of not one but two of the birds, a male and a female, in good habitat. Everyone who admires the bird must have breathed a collective sigh of relief — the ivory-bill is okay; it miraculously survived, and now if we can just maintain enough suitable habitat for it, the species will slowly recover.

What an amazing thought — and how crushing when no one was able to find the birds during subsequent searches. That's what really got me going. I didn't want to give up that dream. I didn't want to accept the idea that the ivory-bill was gone forever. I started looking for people who'd had direct experience with the ivory-bill to see if there was anything I could glean from their knowledge that would help me in my search for this bird. I interviewed dozens of people — a few of whom I felt had definitely seen ivory-bills; many who clearly had not. I read every obscure reference to the bird that I could find. And finally I hit the swamp myself, exploring potential ivory-bill habitat across the South. This effort led directly to the rediscovery.

Scientists have believed for more than six decades that the ivory-bill is extinct, and yet reports of these birds seem to emerge every few years. Why haven't these reports been taken more seriously?

For decades, mainstream ornithologists have pooh-poohed the reports of anyone with the temerity to say that he or she has seen an ivory-billed woodpecker. Even respected ornithologists were laughed at behind their backs for believing the bird still existed. This had a chilling effect on efforts to try to find and help these birds. Some researchers passed up chances to check on credible sightings: it just wasn't worth putting your career at risk when just to admit that you believe the ivory-bill still might exist could subject you to ridicule by your colleagues. To me this is the opposite of what science should be. Scientists should approach every question without bias, weighing the available data and rendering judgment with an open, dispassionate mind. This has been anything but the case with the ivory-billed woodpecker for almost a century. The belief that this bird is extinct has been such a strongly held view for so long it has become a tenet as rigidly and dogmatically held by many ornithologists as those held by the most fundamentalist of religious sects. I believed it was time to change that, which is why I began following up on people's sightings.

What in your opinion is the most important thing about the rediscovery of the ivory-bill?

It gives us one final chance to get it right: to start restoring the vast bottomland forests of the South that these birds require. What happened to these forests during the past 150 years is one of the greatest environmental tragedies in the history of America, and few people know about it. It is still one of our most neglected and abused habitats. I'll never forget reading an article by Theodore Roosevelt about his 1907 trip to the primeval forests of northeastern Louisiana. He actually saw three ivory-bills, which were the high point of his trip. He also described the woods vividly: "In stature, in towering majesty, they are unsurpassed by any trees of our eastern forests; lordlier kings of the green-leaved world are not to be found until we reach the sequoias and redwoods of the Sierras." And yet, at a time when people in this country were saving Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the giant redwoods, they didn't even think about the southern forests. Logging companies took countless millions of board feet of lumber from these woods, year after year after year. Even as late as 1940, when we had the chance to save a remnant of primeval swamp forest at Louisiana's Singer Tract, we didn't do it. We let it go. Consequently, no one in our generation or the next or the next will have the chance to see the spectacle of a southern forest with trees 9 feet in diameter towering 150 feet high. They're gone — obliterated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The best we can hope for now is that through our actions, our great-great-grandchildren may see that forest restored to its former glory. That's what I want.

What was the strangest experience you had while searching for ivory-bills?

It would have to be when a cottonmouth water moccasin — the deadliest southern snake — crawled up into the engine compartment of Bobby Harrison's SUV. You know you're in trouble when a southern man's voice goes up a couple of octaves. "Oh no, it's gone up into the car," Bobby moaned. "What am I gonna do? What'll I tell my wife?" (It was actually her car.) He decided to drive the car back and forth fast, slamming on the brakes, hoping to flip the snake onto the ground. The worst part was that he had to climb back into the car to drive it — after I had mentioned the fact that the snake might be able to crawl inside

through the gas pedal hole or the heater duct. Amazingly, after about a dozen tries, it worked, and the snake came flying out, almost landing at my feet. It was the biggest cottonmouth I've ever seen.

In Pursuit of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker . . . Through the Centuries

1700s

MARK CATESBY

- The first person to describe the species. Catesby wrote a book on natural history in the early 1700s and described the bird as the "largest white-bill wood-pecker."

1800s

ALEXANDER WILSON

- Published the first comprehensive account of North American bird life (1811).
- Tried (unsuccessfully) to keep an ivory-billed woodpecker as a pet.

1920s and '30s

ARTHUR A. ALLEN

- Founded the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.
- Took the first photographs of a living pair of ivory-bills, in Florida in 1924. (Even at this early date, most ornithologists believed they were extinct.) Eleven years later, in Louisiana's famed Singer Tract, Allen made the first motion pictures and sound recordings of an ivory-bill.

JIM TANNER

- Joined the great 1935 Brand-Cornell University-American Museum of Natural History Ornithological Expedition as a graduate student.
- Studied ivory-billed woodpeckers in the Singer Tract (Louisiana) from 1937 to 1939; wrote *The Ivory-billed Woodpecker* (1942).
- The only person who ever studied the species in depth.
- The only person who ever banded an ivory-bill; Tanner nicknamed the bird Sonny Boy.

1940s

NANCY TANNER

- Accompanied her husband, Jim, to the Singer Tract and saw ivory-bills in 1940 and 1941.

DON ECKELBERRY

- A wildlife artist who saw and sketched an ivory-bill in the Singer Tract in April 1944.
- Eckelberry's is the last universally accepted sighting of the bird in the United States.

JOHN V. DENNIS

- Snapped the last scientifically accepted photograph of an ivory-bill, in 1948 in Cuba.
- Later saw an ivory-bill in the Big Thicket country of Texas, though his sighting was largely dismissed by mainstream ornithologists.

1950s

WHITNEY EASTMAN

- Spotted an ivory-bill on the Chipola River in northwestern Florida in March 1950.

HERBERT L. STODDARD

- Saw an ivory-bill over Georgia's Altamaha River during a thunderstorm and also a pair of the woodpeckers in Thomasville, Georgia, in 1958, though he never formally reported the sightings.

JOHN TERRES

- A naturalist and author who sighted a pair of ivory-bills in Florida in 1955 but kept the sighting a secret for more than 30 years for fear of being scorned.

1970s

GEORGE LOWERY

- The first director of Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science. Lowery took a friend's snapshots of an ivory-bill by an anonymous photographer to the 1971 meeting of the American Ornithologists' Union, where they were met with immediate withering skepticism.

FIELDING LEWIS

- The cigar-smoking chairman of the Louisiana state boxing commission and the author of *Tales of a Louisiana Duck Hunter*.
- Took the photographs given to George Lowery. Lewis has no doubt that he saw ivory-bills a number of times in the Atchafalaya Basin.

JAMES VAN REMSEN

- The current curator of birds at Louisiana State University's Museum of Natural Science.
- Holds the unofficial repository of ivory-bill sightings and lore.

1990s

DAVID KULIVAN

- Reported seeing a pair of ivory-bills in Louisiana's Pearl River Wildlife Management Area (less than an hour's drive from New Orleans) while he was hunting turkeys. This sighting led to a series of major searches in the area.
- Kulivan now refuses to discuss the sighting.

2000s

MARY SCOTT

- A former corporate lawyer who left it all behind to chase ghost birds.
- Started searching for ivory-bills in 2000.
- Claims to have seen ivory-bills in Louisiana and Arkansas, though her claims are met with skepticism.

GENE SPARLING

- A seasoned outdoorsman who posted on an online listserv a long description of his trip down a narrow bayou in eastern Arkansas and the "unusual woodpecker" he saw.
- When contacted by Tim Gallagher, he agreed to take Gallagher and his colleague, Bobby Harrison, down the bayou to look for the bird.

BOBBY RAY HARRISON

- An ivory-bill chaser with a large collection of memorabilia. Harrison has been searching for the bird for more than 30 years.

- Spotted the bird with author and friend Tim Gallagher in February 2004. Their sighting spurred an intensive search effort led by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Arkansas chapter of the Nature Conservancy.

TIM GALLAGHER

- The author, who first became interested in the ivory-billed woodpecker in the early 1970s, after reading about the bird in *Life*.
- In 2001, Gallagher began working on a book titled *The Grail Bird*. He embarked on his own quest, finally sighting the bird on February 27, 2004, while following up on a lead from Gene Sparling. His discovery (with Bobby Ray Harrison) sparked the launch of a major search effort, culminating in the protection of the species' continually vanishing habitat.

JOHN "FITZ" FITZPATRICK

- The director of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the former president of the American Ornithologists' Union.
- After discussing the sighting with Tom Gallagher, Fitzpatrick decided that locating and studying the ivory-billed woodpecker(s) in eastern Arkansas would be the lab's number-one research and conservation priority.

SCOTT SIMON

- The state director of the Arkansas chapter of the Nature Conservancy.
- Joined the Bayou de View search team. Simon is working to acquire the land for TNC and is passionately committed to restoring this southern bottomland swamp forest.